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# Educational Leadership

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**Expecting Excellence**



## What Makes a Student College Ready?

*David T. Conley*

**A study of 38 exemplary high schools provides guidelines for ensuring that students are prepared for postsecondary success.**



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Preparing students for college has become a higher priority in many schools as parents, business leaders, and politicians emphasize the importance of a highly educated workforce and citizenry. But what steps do schools need to take to ensure that more students are ready?

## The Big Four

A comprehensive college preparation program must address four distinct dimensions of college readiness: cognitive strategies, content knowledge, self-management skills, and knowledge about postsecondary education.

## Key Cognitive Strategies

Colleges expect their students to think about what they learn. Students entering college are more likely to succeed if they can formulate, investigate, and propose solutions to nonroutine problems; understand and analyze conflicting explanations of phenomena or events; evaluate the credibility and utility of source material and then integrate sources into a paper or project appropriately; think analytically and logically, comparing and contrasting differing philosophies, methods, and positions to understand an issue or concept; and exercise precision and accuracy as they apply their methods and develop their products.

## Key Content Knowledge

Several independently conducted research and development efforts help us identify the key knowledge and skills students should master to take full advantage of college. Standards for Success (Conley, 2003) systematically polled university faculty members and analyzed their course documents to determine what these teachers expected of students in entry-level courses. The American Diploma Project (2004) consulted representatives of the business community and postsecondary faculty to define standards in math and English. More recently, both ACT (2008) and the College Board (2006) have released college readiness standards in English and math. Finally, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (2008), under mandate of state law, developed one of the first and most comprehensive sets of state-level college readiness standards.

These reports are strikingly similar in terms of the content knowledge expectations they outline. They all identify a manageable set of big ideas, key concepts, and organizing principles that form the structure of each academic subject area, and they emphasize the importance of students making connections among the big ideas. This focus on the *structure* of knowledge enables

students to scaffold their understandings in a way that postsecondary education can build on.

## **Key Self-Management Skills**

In college, students must keep track of massive amounts of information and organize themselves to meet competing deadlines and priorities. They must plan their time carefully to complete these tasks. They must be able to study independently and in informal and formal study groups. They must know when to seek help from academic support services and when to cut their losses and drop a course. These tasks require self-management, a skill that individuals must develop over time, with considerable practice and trial-and-error.

## **Key Knowledge About Postsecondary Education**

Choosing a college, applying, securing financial aid, and then adjusting to college life require a tremendous amount of specialized knowledge. This knowledge includes matching personal interests with college majors and programs; understanding federal and individual college financial aid programs and how and when to complete appropriate forms; registering for, preparing for, and taking required admissions exams; applying to college on time and submitting all necessary information; and, perhaps most important, understanding how the culture of college is different from that of high school.

Students generally demonstrate uneven mastery of these four dimensions. Although it is important for high schools to meet the needs of all students who wish to go on to postsecondary education, some students require a much more intentional, comprehensive program of preparation that is carefully calibrated to their needs. Students who would be the first in their family to attend college, students from immigrant families, students who are members of racial and ethnic minority groups traditionally underrepresented in college, and students from low-income families are much more easily thrown off the path to college if they have deficiencies in any of the four dimensions.

## **Learning from Best-Practice High Schools**

The Educational Policy Improvement Center, with support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, undertook an in-depth study of 38 high schools to find out how these schools prepared their students for college.<sup>1</sup> We used multiple criteria to identify schools that were doing an outstanding job of college preparation. These schools came from a variety of community types (urban, suburban, and rural). Most served large numbers of students from groups that have historically been underrepresented in college.

We then sent teams of researchers to each school for two-day visits that included classroom observations, interviews, and focus groups with all key constituent groups. We collected artifacts and documents, including data on the proportion of students who went on to college from each school and, where possible, how these students fared in college. We analyzed the information collected from these site visits and other sources to generate an exhaustive list of characteristics common to schools that prepare their students for college successfully. From these findings, we developed a comprehensive set of principles that schools can follow if they wish to increase the proportion of students who are ready for postsecondary education. We present four of those principles here with some brief examples of how schools put them into practice.

### **Principle 1: Create and Maintain a College-Going Culture**

High schools with a college-going culture project the pervasive, schoolwide belief that all students can succeed in postsecondary education. These high schools send the message that all students should be focusing on college as their goal. The question for students is not whether to attend college, but how to prepare for college and how to make the transition successful.

The schools that we visited engaged in a range of practices designed to create a college-going culture. Many schools automatically enrolled students in a program of study designed to prepare them for college unless their parents specifically opted them out of that schedule. Schools posted college acceptance letters prominently so that all students were aware of their peers' success. Award ceremonies focused on students' academic accomplishments and recognized students who had been accepted to college. A few schools even required all students to apply to at least one postsecondary institution.

Faculty advisors met with a designated group of students monthly to review grades, discuss

course selection, and develop strategies to overcome any learning obstacles. In 12th grade, college counselors worked intensively with students, providing technical support related to college application, choice, and financial aid. Schools arranged multiple visits to college campuses to demystify college, especially for potential first-generation college attenders. Senior seminars, required for all 12th graders, provided information, financial aid applications, encouragement, and support.

## **Principle 2: Align the Core Academic Program with College Readiness Standards**

These schools went beyond alignment with state standards, designing their curriculum to prepare students for college readiness generally and for advanced placement courses specifically. They strove to align course expectations, assignments, goals, and activities vertically across grades 9–12, using a set of college readiness standards as the reference point. Smaller schools, newly constituted schools, and charter schools had more success than large comprehensive high schools in achieving full alignment, but even the large schools could demonstrate areas where alignment had been achieved.

An additional strategy that we observed was to require all students at a given grade level in a given subject to complete a common performance task. For example, a school might require all students taking a sophomore English course to complete the same writing task, which their teachers scored using common criteria. This activity enabled the school to calibrate expectations across courses. Teachers also met to read student work and compare their expectations for their students. This strategy is particularly important in schools with diverse student populations, which may be in danger of establishing different expectations for different groups of students.

## **Principle 3: Teach Key Self-Management Skills**

In our visits, we encountered numerous strategies and programs designed to help students improve their study skills; collect, organize, and retain factual information; take better notes; manage their time more effectively and efficiently; work in teams; and reflect on the quality of their work.

Students in one rural high school assembled work samples regularly, self-assessed their performance using a common scoring guide, and subsequently led a conference with their advisor and parents in which they presented and assessed their work and set goals. Many schools provided day planners or other time-management tools. Some schools went further by monitoring students' use of these planning tools.

## **Principle 4: Prepare Students for the Complexity of Applying to College**

Because many of the schools we visited had large concentrations of students who would be first-generation college attenders, educators provided college information to these students repeatedly and systematically during all four years of high school. Some schools required all students to take one or more college readiness tests, such as the American College Testing Program's EXPLORE, PLAN, and ACT series or the College Board's PSAT and SAT. Student advisors helped students interpret the results and use them to become more college-ready.

Many of these schools had extensive programs of student and parent information to explain financial aid. Some offered help completing financial aid forms. Most of the schools made college real to their students through visitation programs, dual enrollment courses, and opportunities for their students to take college courses. In all cases, the high schools supported students who were engaged in these activities.

## **Is Your School Preparing Students for College?**

The goal of this project was to identify common effective practices for getting a wider range of students ready for college. We have synthesized our findings into a self-evaluation tool—the College Readiness Evaluation for Students and Teachers—which will help high schools determine how well they are addressing the four dimensions of college readiness. Schools do the self-evaluation by having teachers, counselors, and administrators complete an online instrument. This input generates a report listing the areas in which the school could improve college readiness practices, an explanation of why the highlighted areas are important, and which

activities the school should undertake first. Also included are links to a range of proven resources that the school can use to get started on an improvement plan.

The self-evaluation tool is being field tested during the 2008–09 school year. Schools that are interested in participating as field test sites should contact the Education Policy Improvement Center (EPIC) at 877-766-2279.

By learning from a set of best-practice high schools, all high schools can begin to move in the right direction, emphasizing the knowledge, skills, dispositions, programs, and practices necessary for all students to be successful in postsecondary educational settings.

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## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> To learn more about the study and to view the complete set of principles with examples from schools, visit the [EPIC Web site](http://www.epiconline.org/college_readiness_evaluation). [[www.epiconline.org/college\\_readiness\\_evaluation](http://www.epiconline.org/college_readiness_evaluation)]

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